

## MEMORIAL SERVICE FOR ROBERT MILTON VAN HOUSE

Delivered by his nephew, Rev. Kendall W. Cowing, May 8, 2004, in Dayton, Ohio

If we open our Bibles to the Second Letter of Timothy, Chapter 4, verse 7, we find these words, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith". These words were written by the Apostle Paul to Timothy as he neared the end of a long and useful life. I can think of no finer words of courage and confidence than these.

Life comes to each of us as a challenge and it is not so much what the challenge is, but how we respond to that challenge that really counts. Happy indeed is the person who reaches the evening of life, and can look back over the years and truthfully say "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith". Certainly Uncle Bob was such a person and deserves such a tribute!

To lose a friend or loved one brings sadness to many hearts and leaves us with the feeling so fittingly expressed by Edwin Markham about Abraham Lincoln. "He went down as when a mighty cedar, green with boughs, goes down upon the hills, and leaves a lonesome place against the sky".

I do not need to remind you that there is a very lonesome place in many hearts here today, but we rejoice in the knowledge that "to live in the hearts of those we leave behind, is not to die".

### FIRST I WOULD SPEAK OF THE FULLNESS OF BOB'S LIFE:

Every moment was filled with some useful or meaningful act. His experiences were unlimited..and his days were very exciting! During his lifetime (partly due to his significant role in creating and producing three signature icons for General Motors...Firebird(s) I, II, III) Bob rubbed shoulders with the rich and the poor, the exalted and the lowly, both influential and ordinary people: every fellow human being was important to him!

Everyone who knew him recognized and admired his industry and his work ethic. He was always busily (and happily) engaged in doing something! Someone who knew him well commented, "Bob's Work was his pleasure."

I am reminded of an early story about Ralph Waldo Emerson, who as a boy, lived on a farm. One day he was given the task of bringing a balky young heifer into the barn. He tried pulling and tugging, pushing and dragging to no avail...whereupon, an Irish hired girl who had been standing on the porch watching with great amusement, strode out to the barnyard, dipped her finger into a pail of milk, stuck it into the heifer's mouth and led it into the barn. Emerson went into the house, took down his journal and wrote emphatically: "I love persons who can DO things." Certainly Emerson would have loved Uncle Bob for that quality...Bob was known as a person who could and did DO things! In this respect a poem of Rudyard Killings' describes Uncle Bob:

When Earth's last picture is painted,  
 And the tubes are twisted and dried,  
 When the oldest colors have faded,  
 And the youngest critic has died,  
 We shall rest, and faith we shall need it,  
 Lie down for an aeon or two,  
 Till the Master of all good workmen,  
 Shall put us to work anew.

And only the Master shall praise us,  
 And only the Master shall blame,  
 And no one will work for money,  
 And no one will work for fame.  
 But each for the joy of the working,  
 And each in his separate star,  
 Shall draw all things as he sees them,  
 For the God of things as they are.  
 Rudyard Kipling

And today, If I can perceive anything across the veil of life and death...the heavenly gates are being re-engineered, reset, and realigned; along with any other tasks that may need doing!

AND I WOULD SPEAK OF THE COMPLETENESS OF HIS LIFE!

Uncle Bob had tasted of the most meaningful experiences that life offers. He was blessed with fine parents for whom he had great respect. They shared with him a meaningful family heritage which he treasured, and which he, in turn, passed on to us. He established a good home with his wife (of 63 years) to whom he was extremely devoted and reared three sons and a daughter of whom he was extremely proud. His attitude toward life and family is aptly expressed by the poem:

What matters that my youthful hopes are gone,  
 And all my castles fallen with the years.  
 That golden dreams have vanished with the dawn.  
 That childhood faith has turned to doubts and fears.

Four heirs have I, clear-eyed and unafraid,  
 The visions that were mine to them I give.  
 What matters then the failures I have made,  
 If hopes long dead in me, thru them may live.

My feet grow weary, and the trail seems long.  
 The goal I glimpsed, I never will attain.  
 But if, thru them my hopes are living on,  
 Tho' I be dead, I have not lived in vain.

His was a successful life, as success can be measured, in nearly every way...the other ways were simply not important to him. He was loved and respected (as his memory is now) by all who knew him. His integrity was unquestioned and his character beyond reproach. He leaves us a heritage rich and memorable, and an example we all would do well to consider as a model for our own lives!

Someone has likened death to a rosebush planted beside a wall...after a while the roots penetrate beneath the wall and it blooms in all its beauty on the other side. It is a simple analogy but profound and very real in its simplicity.

In "The Prophet" by Kahlil Gibran, the issue of death is raised, and he says: "... You would know the secret of death. But how shall you find it unless you seek it in the heart of life" If you would indeed behold the spirit of death, open your heart wide unto the body of life.  
For life and death are one, even as the river and the sea are one.

In the depth of your hopes and desires lies your silent knowledge of the beyond;  
And like seeds dreaming beneath the snow your heart dreams of spring.  
Trust your dreams, for in them is hidden the gate to eternity.  
Your fear of death is but the trembling of the shepherd  
when he stands before the king whose hand is to be laid upon him in honor...

For what is it to die but to stand naked in the wind and to melt into the sun?  
And what is it to cease breathing, but to free the breath from its restless tides,  
That it may rise and expand and seek God unencumbered."

Only when you drink from the river of silence shall you indeed sing.  
And when you have reached the mountain top, then you shall begin to climb.  
And when the earth shall claim your limbs, then shall you truly dance."

The Quaker poet, John Greenleaf Whittier expressed his deep faith in immortality in these lines from "Snowbound"

#### YET LOVE WILL DREAM

Yet love will dream, and faith will trust,  
(Since he who knows our need is just)  
That somehow, somewhere, meet we must.  
Alas, for him who never sees  
The stars shine through his cypress trees!  
Who, hopeless, lays his head away  
Nor looks to see the breaking day  
Across the mournful marble play!  
Who hath not learned, in hours of faith  
The truth to flesh and sense unknown,  
That Life is ever Lord of Death  
And love can never lose its own!

A humorous story is told about the aging Bishop Henry Holt Hughes. When Bishop Hughes, who was known for his decisiveness and salty disposition, retired he had a church bell mounted in the back yard of his home...because when he wanted to hear a church bell he wanted to hear a church bell! One day in the mail came news of the death of a close friend. Bishop Hughes walked to the window, flung it open and yelled to his housekeeper who was hanging out the washing, "Ring the Bell!" Matter-of-factly she walked over to the post and gave the rope a tug. "Ring it louder! Ring it louder!" Yelled the Bishop, "This is Henry's Coronation day!"

In this same spirit I would like us to remember this day as Uncle Bob's Coronation day! Clearly a Victory, not a defeat!

Someone has suggested what when we are young, heaven is a vague and nebulous and shadowy place...and I think this is true, (at least it was for me). But as our friends gather there, the concept of 'heaven' gains vividness and homeliness and reality...and when our dearest loved ones have passed yonder, how much more real and evident it grows; how near it is, and how often we steal yonder in memory and fantasy. For as the Master put it, Where our treasure is there will our heart be also. The old hymn which states, "there is a happy land far, far away " is very wrong in my opinion.

It is not far...they are very near and their presence with us is a tremendous and most blessed reality!

**"Because I live, you shall live also", said Jesus.**

**Clearly God's answer to death is life! The Bible contains a faith based on life, not death, it tells us that what appears to be death only seems so...that the real fact is eternal life. It is this faith which Uncle Bob held. It is this faith which sustains us now, and through which we commit him into our Father's keeping in perfect trust.**

**Amen.**